

Misty had always known that dealing with the insurance company was going to be a pain in the ass. As expected, there were thousands of claims pouring in from all over the city, and her damages couldn't be covered for the time being. Apparently, "acts of god" were not covered. That, and the overwhelming amount of claims meant that she was likely not going to see the form of payout that she had been paying for, at least not for a long time.

Long enough where she might as well stop herself ahead of time.

When the shop was as clean as she was going to get it, she found her hands wandering idly. A few rolls of fabric had been spared. A few costumes in various stages of progress, and a few of her needles and threads. She was no longer going to fill these orders, and while her telephone still worked just fine, the damage done by the quakes had been severe enough to warrant customers not bothering to check in on their orders.

Except for one.

A Gravent who wanted some kind of lame and tasteless costume. Misty had been bored by the request at the time and found it to be pointless now. Sure, she could have finished it in theory, but the local coffee shop was handing out as much coffee and pastries to the people helping to clear the rubble as they could, and other business owners whose livelihoods had gone up in flames or sunk into the earth were doing what they could with whatever they had.

One of the shops sold second and third hand clothing, and their shelves had been cleared to clothe the people who had run out of their collapsing homes in whatever they were wearing at the time. Mostly pajamas and loungewear. No shoes for a majority of them. The cold was biting, and many of the injured were not lucky enough to be able to knit themselves together without assistance. Not lucky enough to be able to ward off the cold.

A gourmet grocery store rationed out everything they had on the shelves after the electricity had gone out. Mostly to human families and other groups that needed food to survive. Storefronts became little refugee hotspots to allow shelter from the cold, and safety from the ichor beasts that still climbed out of the cracks like spiteful insects hellbent on swarming.

Misty had to keep her hands busy while she helped. She ferried a lot of coffees to volunteers, gathered up tools and reorganized care packages. When the thrift store's supplies ran out, Misty found this to be the perfect opportunity to chip in herself. What better use of her time than to take the unfinished costumes and repurpose them?

When the call came in, Mitsy jumped, her cerulean tentacles curling tighter in the loose ponytail she had tied to keep herself from twitching too much. She pricked her finger on a needle and hissed, sucking on the wound as she picked up the receiver. A heady dread weighed on her as she heard the telltale signs of a Gravent on the other side. She hadn't even thought about Stonewing during the quakes, though she didn't really care to blame herself either. There were more immediate dangers, and it had long since become common knowledge that Stonewing was untouched outside of a few flying ichor beasts.

"Hello?" Misty said, not bothering to hide her disinterest. The only types of people who would be calling this number were clients, none of which she cared about at the moment. Her hands would not stop wringing.

"Hello," came the chipper voice. "I'm calling to check on the status of my Long Night costume order."

"You cannot be serious," Misty replied, voice curt and unamused. Had she more anger than dejection, she might have yelled. How selfish.

"Oh, I am quite serious," the Gravent said. "The deadline is approaching."

"I will not be able to finish your order," Misty said.

Her tentacles wound tighter. Oh, how she wanted to yell. To expend what little energy she had to scold this random person who she didn't even recognize based on voice alone - so unlike her. How pointless it all was. When she spoke, she stared out the storefront at the rest of her neighborhood continuing to trudge along at a snail's pace to reclaim anything of the past, when things were good.

She followed the oil slick trails that had permanently ruined the floor and ceiling, traced the coffee rings on the dusty counter with a wandering finger. She hadn't caught the too-long complaint at all, and didn't return to the conversation at hand until the Gravent chirped at her.

"It's really important to me."

Misty frowned. "Do you know how many people are dead?"

"Excuse me?"

Misty cleared her throat. "You're a Gravent, right? Natasha? I remember our consultation. The witch, just like everyone else, ha ha. Special order near-vanta-black fabric, dark purple lace, aerodynamic hat, vent wing slots?" Yes, it was coming back to her.

The Gravent swallowed. Misty could hear the tackiness of their throat and the wetness that returned after a few sips of something. There was a peal of laughter in the background as the Gravent failed to respond. Maybe there were a dozen Gravents around them, chatting away at lightning speeds in their safe haven.

"That's right," The Gravent barked. "What did you say to me?"

"I asked you if you knew how many people were dead," Misty replied. "The internet is out in my neighborhood. So is the electricity in most of it. I'm surprised I still have some, to be honest."

Though she recalled that a few outlets were wired incorrectly, so it was actually attached to the building next door. None of that mattered, but it would have come up with a Gravent client in the past. They had this aura about them that made oversharing easier. Random non-sequiturs were a dime a dozen when conversing with the Songbirds. This was no different, but Misty felt like vomiting when the words worked their way through her clearing gills.

"I don't know," the Gravent said, words fading.

"The last I heard, it was in the hundreds of thousands."

Silence.

"And while I appreciated your business," Misty added. "I no longer have that same sentiment."

"Sorry."

"I don't want or need an apology. I want you to hang up, and I want you to never call this number again."

There was a brief pause before Misty's head filled with the dull drone of a disconnected dial tone. She slammed the receiver down on the base, picked it up, and slammed it down again. Again and again and again until her hands hurt. She refused to cry about this, to give into the chaos that surged inside her. A dark throbbing pain that made so little sense to her, but felt so familiar that it made her groan.

She saw the piles of unfinished costumes and rifled through her little sewing kit to find a seam ripper. With all the power in the world, she tore through every single seam in every single

costume she still had. It was a massacre of torn threads and ripping fabric. She almost wished that her projects could bleed so she could destroy them without thinking about herself, about everything that lead up to this, about everything that would come after.

She tore apart the last of her own livelihood until hot tears balled up behind her eyes and she blinked them away. She was going to turn these forgotten projects into something useful, starting with a stunning pair of near-vanta-black gloves.

As she cast the remains of a witch that had never had a chance to fly into her fury, Misty thought about how many people were suddenly gone in an instant, never to be found again, not even as piles of dust. Everything felt so hopeless now, and she wished she could go back to the hospital and fall back into a slumber. At least then she'd be able to skip past all the horror.

A horror so familiar though she couldn't have possibly been able to place it. Thoughts of Alloy returned, flashing across her mind's eye as she realized that her time was drawing to a close. She could leave all this behind, and be safe within sturdy walls that wouldn't crumble even if the gods gnawed on the concrete themselves. She could see his scales, his toothy smile, and his tousled hair. Dark amber eyes that would only appear behind closed doors.

He'd welcome her, maybe even with open arms, considering how much he loved beautiful things, especially beautiful Nautipods.

She was broken out of her stupor only when she heard an irritated bark from the front of her shop. She had no idea how much time had passed, though the cloudy grays of an incoming storm had darkened considerably.

There, standing in the door frame, was Hacksaw, who looked exhausted. Far duller in color than she remembered. There was a clear difference in the shades of his fur from where he had been doused in magic canceling poison. He was as stiff as she remembered, and his nostrils flared with every exhalation.

"Oh, Sharp-Back!" Misty gasped. "You're alive!"

Hacksaw snorted. Sharp-Back, indeed. When he fully entered the shop, Misty tensed and Hacksaw froze, his ears flattening in what was meant to be a gesture of good faith, though all it did was make him appear more feral. His striped tendrils relaxed, the tips barely brushing against his shoulders and the corners of his lips tugged down.

"I am not here to hurt you," he whispered.

Misty, unable to stop herself, crossed her arms, feeling a phantom crawling under the skin at her forearm. She still had a few stitches from the altercation, and the stippling in her flesh was still there from when she had been elbow deep in his maw.

"Then what are you here for?" She asked.

Hacksaw grunted. "I want to apologize."

Misty found the sentiment alarming. Upon first glance, she had pegged him for the type to never apologize for actions he thought were correct. She'd met at least a dozen other Humans like him, and apologies from those sorts rang hollow to her. He waited for her, his long tail curled awkwardly around his knees, the ornate red hook hovering just above the floor, not like it mattered.

"Okay, then," she replied. "Go ahead."

Hacksaw took a deep breath and assessed the full extent of the damage that he could see. There were signs of his previous struggle with the ichor beast, though most of the

immediate mess had been cleared out. His cluster eyes darted around for a while before refocusing on Misty, who jumped.

"I am sorry for ruining your life," Hacksaw said. "It was not my intention to do so."

Probably one of the worst apologies Misty had ever heard, but forgiveness came easy to her. The way his whole demeanor had morphed from the disgruntled and dissatisfied subordinate to this stony pillar was like peering into the sun after waking in the morning. It was obvious that since they had last spoken, something terrible had happened.

Something unimaginable.

"You'll have to make it up to me," Misty said, expecting pushback. Ornery guys like this always pushed back on accountability.

"Okay," Hacksaw replied. "Then I will do that. What do you want me to do?"

Misty looked around at her shop once again, feeling the weight of what she had to do push her further down into a memorial madness. This was her whole life, and it could be rebuilt in theory. Brick by brick.

Though maybe the first thing that needed to happen was not within her walls. One of the more damaged shops had heavy machinery that needed to be moved, and there were not enough hands to move it safely. If nothing else, he could start there.

He didn't need to know that she had forgiven him already. Not yet. After all, you didn't look a gift Crook in the mouth.